

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

Many of you were shocked by the quotations in a recent News-Letter from an article in a Sunday newspaper, which brazenly proposed that we should adopt as the basis of our national policy the good old rule and simple plan "that they should take who have the power, and they should keep who can."

It is not difficult to perceive the menace to the values of civilization when Satan shows himself with his horns and cloven hoof. The danger is greater when he appears as an angel of light, arrayed in the mantle of the most brilliant human achievements. What I wrote about four weeks ago is only one aspect of a more formidable, pervasive and insidious danger which threatens the whole future of mankind. I mean the enormous stimulation of the impulse to power, mastery and domination by the dazzling possibilities of modern science, and the consequent one-sided and unbalanced development of man's nature.

Do not suppose that I am going to attack science. The record of the Church in relation to science has been in the main deplorable. We must get rid once and for all of a defensive attitude. Science is not something to be feared but a gift to be welcomed with open arms.

SCIENCE IN THE MODERN WORLD

Four facts about the influence of science to-day demand our serious consideration. Christians as a whole are not in the least awake either to what is happening or to what is at stake. Mr. W. G. Symons, representing the younger generation among the Christian laity, says in a contribution to the November issue of *Theology* that "many of our Christian writers and thinkers seem almost unaware of what is going on in the world around, and the vital schools of theology are just not interested in scientific affairs, and maintain an attitude of cultured and dogmatic aloofness."

First, science is indispensable for the solution of modern social problems. We may take for illustration the report of a conference on "Mineral Resources and the Atlantic Charter," held last July under the auspices of the British Association.¹ The title of the conference is significant. The conference brought out impressively the extent to which industrial civilization has become dependent for its existence on mineral products—not merely on half a dozen basic metals which have served man's purposes from the beginning of history, but on a much larger number which in the last half century have become necessary as alloys. These are very unevenly distributed throughout the world. Sir Thomas Holland insisted at the conference that very few students of international affairs have awakened to the fact that *the configuration of our civilized system has fundamentally changed*. The hard, unalterable facts with which this body of scientists were concerned are more decisive for the future peace and well-being of human societies than most blue-prints of a new order drawn up by well-meaning persons in ignorance or forgetfulness of these realities.

¹ *The Advancement of Science*, Vol. II, No. 7. British Association, Burlington House, W. 1. 5s.

A knowledge of the dynamic forces of a changing society is, of course, as essential for the right ordering of human affairs as the study of minerals. Professor Hodges, in a broadcast talk ten days ago on the relation of Christianity and science, denounced the social and political idealisms which imagine that poverty, oppression and war can be overcome by exhorting people to justice, love and peace. These, he pointed out, are not the results of baseless wickedness, which a sermon could expose and constant exhortation could cure, but of many complicated factors in the sphere of property and power; and our idealism is not worth the breath we spend on it unless we take the trouble to understand the facts and the way they work.

Secondly, the intellectual climate of our time has been largely formed, and is dominated by, scientific ways of thought. The following passage from a remarkable and challenging article in the July and October issues of the *Political Quarterly* deserves to be carefully pondered. The author, who writes under a pen-name, is a high authority on science and, though not a Christian, a warm friend of the Christian News-Letter:—

“It is a fact that the pursuit of science produces certain effects on the mental and spiritual life. Scientific interest changes the content of the mind so fundamentally that ultimately it alters even the way of thinking. Science has done more than give us a new heaven and a new earth—not merely an altered and revised version of heaven and earth, but a heaven and earth of a kind unknown before. Science has also given us new minds and hearts and memories to enjoy the new heaven and earth. Theologians miss this point at their peril, for science has set such a wall between the generations as has never before been seen. . . . The sciences have directed human interest into new paths, given a new content to minds and found a new way in which they may work.”

In the issue of *The Advancement of Science* already quoted, there is included a report of a committee on post-war university education, recommending among other measures the establishment of honours and pass schools of “Philosophy, Natural and Social,” which would aim at providing “an outlook on the modern world, seen as an integrated whole against a background of natural science.” Some common basis of understanding of the world and of social purposes is one of the greatest needs of a society which is disintegrating amid an anarchy of competing world-views. It is plainly the intention of the framers of the report that moral and religious ideas should form part of the new philosophy. But without an effort on the part of Christians, of which there are at present few signs, the proposal might result in the mind of the community being dominated and formed by an understanding of life incompatible with Christian beliefs.

Thirdly, the results of science in its own province are so convincing and amazing, that we need not be surprised at the claim being put forward that it is capable of comprehending the whole of life and experience and is the sole source of knowledge. A large number of scientists ardently believe that science can give us the world we desire or, at least, that it offers the only hope.¹ It is not enough to be convinced that there is an adequate answer to such views and dismiss the matter from our minds. The important thing is that this is what many vigorous minds to-day believe and teach. It is re-enforced in the minds of the general public by the enormous prestige attaching to science because of its achievements in the technical sphere. We have also to reckon with the fact that the astonishing performance of Russia in the war has predisposed multitudes of ordinary men towards ideas which are thought to have inspired this prodigious effort. As the writer of the article in the *Political Quarterly* points out, Communism “has gained an enormous adventitious prestige from its special eagerness for alliance with that triumphant scientific movement which, for various equally adventitious reasons, Christianity has largely treated as a foe.” The one has come to terms with science, the other has not.

¹ A sign of the times is the widely discussed volume *Science and Ethics*, edited by Dr. C. H. Waddington (Allen and Unwin. 7s. 6d.), to which, if there had been space, I should have liked to make fuller reference. As a contribution to the understanding of an important subject the discussion is disappointingly lacking in both clarity and depth.

Fourthly, the whole set of ideas referred to in the preceding paragraph is percolating through a thousand channels—books, newspapers and broadcast talks—into the public mind. It is transmitted unconsciously by talks and articles on science which have no obvious religious reference but in fact presuppose, and consequently convey, a view of the ultimate issues of life quite different from the Christian. It finds a predisposed and receptive audience among the very large and increasing section of the population which, through work in factories and the technical branches of the Services, is brought into touch with technological processes and the scientific knowledge on which they depend.

The following letter from a school chaplain describes a state of things to which the Church as a whole is strangely indifferent :—

“ By far the greatest obstacle to a vigorous Christianity among the educated classes, as shown in the youth of those classes, is the prevalent agnosticism. I do not mean that every boy professes or is inclined to be an agnostic ; but I mean that all the clever boys find it hard to take the Christian position, and, though they are not out consciously to wreck Christianity in the school, yet their influence is bound to pervade the place. Boys read such authors as Julian Huxley, Joad, Wells, Waddington. *The Scientific Attitude*, by the latter, is much read, and is typical of the point of view which guides the intellectual life of our educated young. Now it seems strange to me that, in view of this fact, the matter receives so little attention from our authors and speakers. To judge by the reaction which I get when I mention this to important people, the explanation is either that they think I have a bee in my bonnet or else that the subject is so disturbing that they can't face it.”

THE PIVOTAL QUESTION

In a world dominated by the scientific outlook Christians can act effectively only if they know where they stand in relation to it. This requires clarification of our attitude in two opposite directions. On the one hand, within its own province, the authority of science must be unreservedly acknowledged. Whatever its methods enable it to investigate, it must be free to explore. Our attitude towards it must be wholly positive. Every advance in knowledge, every human skill that enables man to master his natural and social environment and to improve his earthly lot is a cause for joy ; without techniques modern society could not exist. On the other hand we need to know, not merely at the intellectual level, but in the deepest region of our being, that science is not everything ; that it represents only one attitude to life.

In the scientific approach to the world we take the attitude of spectator, investigator, judge. We turn our knowledge into power and use it to make, control and direct things. We can, however, relate ourselves to life in quite a different way through response and surrender. The fundamental difference between these two attitudes has been seen in recent times with greater clearness, and stated with greater force, as it seems to me, by thinkers on the continent of Europe than among ourselves. The pivotal issue has been decisively formulated by Martin Buber in his statement that there are *two* fundamental words of human speech, and that these are *uninterchangeable*. The one is the combined word I-It, which expresses our relation to things, and the other the combined word I-Thou, which expresses our response to persons.

The real world is the world in which persons encounter and respond to one another in the *living present*. The idea of the living present, just because it relates to what lies outside the province of science, is necessarily strange to those whose thinking is dominated by scientific modes of thought. The following passage from Karl Heim's *God Transcendent*¹ may convey an hint of what is intended :—

“ What presents itself to us in objective form, so that we may have a spectator's view of it, is never the world in the process of becoming, but always what has already become. Only that which is dead and rigid can be measured, dissected, weighed and counted. That which presents

itself to our eyes as the object of scientific analysis is not the molten condition of becoming, not the living, intangible, mysterious, tempestuous fulness of primary happening. What we hear and see is always that which is past, though it may have occurred only the smallest fraction of a second before. It has gone over the razor-edge which separates present and past. We thus have one primary distinction—the distinction between the already-decided, and therefore the not-to-be-altered, and that which is in process of being decided and, therefore, may fall this way or that.”

It is only with the world of the already-decided that science can deal. Lest you may think that I am relying too much on continental writers, I add this quotation from the late Professor A. A. Bowman,¹ one of the acutest of British thinkers :—

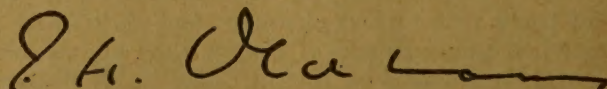
“ Assuming then, as we are bound to assume, *the life that is one with personal existence*, we find ourselves in a realm of being, and confronting a reality, which is altogether beyond the cognisance of any science.”

It is *within* this social context of the living encounter of persons or groups, of mutual response and mutual contradiction, that scientific insight and technical invention occur. The world of science is an abstraction from the living and real world. This is not to deny what I think some of the scientists to whom I have referred are contending for, that science can have an important influence on human relations ; our relations with persons are affected in all sorts of ways by our relation to things, and consequently by the conclusions of science.

Now for the vital question which concerns us all. The conflict to-day is not between Christianity and science. It is against the headstrong tendency of the modern world to exalt one side of man's nature at the expense of other and more important sides, reducing his life to smaller and narrower dimensions. Doctrines of grab and loot are merely symptoms of this wider, deeper and more dangerous tendency.

The life and death question for the future of mankind is whether Christians can affirm the larger and richer view at the new level to which scientific advance has raised one side of man's nature—not by a negative attitude towards the achievements of science, but by a more abounding vitality which perceives man's true destiny as something greater than control over the world of things. To restore in this way the true balance of man's nature will demand an effort as great, sustained and world-wide as that which made the triumphs of science possible, requiring the same qualities of courage, imagination, persistence, self-discipline and devotion, and others besides. It is in a new form the age-long question whether the primary meaning of man's life is to be found in mastery and domination or in communion and love.

Yours sincerely,



¹ *The Absurdity of Christianity* (S.C.M. Press, out of print).

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